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Do Institutional Social Networks Work? Fostering a Sense of Community and Enhancing Learning

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Abstract In this paper we report on the evaluation of an institutional social network (KINSHIP) whose aims were to foster an improved sense of community, enhance communication and serve as a space to model digital professionalism for students at King's College London, UK. Our evaluation focused on a pilot where students' needs with regard to the provision of a cross-institution platform and perceptions were examined. Empirical findings in this study project an advantage of KINSHIP compared to commercial social networks, as it is exclusively accessible by students and staff from the institution and mainly being used for academic purposes. Ongoing development and evolution of functionality in step with commercial platforms, improved accessibility via redeveloping the platform as a mobile application and addressing privacy concerns raised by the students about potential monitoring by staff or the institution would also be essential if such an institutional platform were to be a success.

Keywords Institutional social network · Technology enhanced learning · Informal learning · Social media design · Functionality · Online privacy

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1 Introduction

The proliferation of social media and social networking has been associated with the transition from content-centred to people-centred activities. Social media sites in an educational context operate outside formal learning constraints, having characteristics that make them unique in relation to previous generations of learning technologies. These characteristics include: visibility, transparency, and creation of open communities (Hatzipanagos and Warburton 2009). Institutions are frequently reluctant to embed such characteristics in institutional sites and to allow exchanges that override authentication boundaries; these boundaries are commonly associated with learning technologies that are monitored, moderated and have a clear academic purpose, such as the institutional virtual learning environment. Empirical research shows that learners often struggle while confronted with digital learning environments and educators lack competencies how to implement emerging technologies for learning and instruction in a meaningful way (Ifenthaler et al. 2014). In this context, educators' confidence in and experience with social media is still perceived as a barrier for successful implementation within teaching and learning (Conole and Alevizou 2010). There seems to be limited staff (and student) awareness of issues of ownership of content and intellectual property (IP) rights when using social media commercial platforms that assert that they own the content generated by users. The use of social media is not regulated either in most cases by institutional policies, making engagement with social media uncharted territory. The social media platforms are still new and their affordances (Conole and Dyke 2004) have not fully been explored and articulated. For instance, this raises concern for academic discussions on digital platforms, where theories can evolve and IP is created. Finally, learners are often equally unwilling to engage in learning interactions in spaces that they consider their own and private.

2 Student Communities and Social Media: Opportunities

Social media can help users to link to professional communities, where experts can provide feedback, support and professional identity scaffolding to novices (Hatzipanagos 2012) and create self-help sub-groups that can move between boundaries, following a communities of practice trajectory (Lave and Wenger 1991). These environments can support users in developing an appropriate, professional digital voice, according to accepted professional norms around a discipline. Through linking to other learner and expert groups and to co-curricular (complementing but not part of the regular curriculum) and interdisciplinary groups, crossing the curriculum horizontally (from discipline to discipline) and vertically (from novices to experts), members are not confined by disciplinary/progression barriers in sharing experiences and learning from peers. In addition, social media allow embedding informal and formal lines of communication and formal/informal assessment with an emphasis on formative rather than summative activities.

Social media can support and sustain communities much better than previous generations of learning technologies, where institutional barriers undermined any initiatives for embedding informal learning. There are some key social media technologies, like social networking that have already had an impact on student learning, based on empirical evidence. Participants in web-based social networking are immersed in digital environments, and engage in acts of computer-mediated communication (Hatzipanagos 2006). Social networking is productive of and exercised by virtual communities of users with

common interests, through self-representation, performance and play (Warburton and Hatzipanagos 2013). The paper reports on the evaluation of such an institutional social network (KINSHIP) whose aims were to foster a community of students and enhance communication.

3 Materials and Methods

KINSHIP (King's Social Harmonisation Project) is a King's College social networking site and the deliverable of an internal teaching fund project (John 2012). The aims of the project were to (1) foster an improved sense of community, (2) enhance communication and (3) serve as a space to model digital professionalism for students at the college.

This pilot study was conducted employing an online survey that investigated students' views and attitudes towards KINSHIP. The survey was created using Survey Monkey, an online survey software tool. A total of 1653 registered participants were approached to complete the survey via a survey link attached in the circulated emails. The survey included multiple-choice and open-ended questions for eliciting participant-oriented perspectives. The survey questions were centred on five key areas: (1) the relationship between KINSHIP and other social networks, (2) the students' rationale for using KINSHIP, (3) the students' views and attitudes towards the use of KINSHIP (4) students' views on the use of KINSHIP for establishing a sense of academic community and (5) views on the use of KINSHIP in line with other institutional platforms to assist learning.

In addition, two KINSHIP users and medical tutors were interviewed regarding the ability of KINSHIP to support nursing and medical students in undergraduate elective modules in which students were given the opportunity to put their skills and knowledge to practice in a health and social care context. The emerging interview themes were utilised to complement and triangulate the findings from the survey. Although only two interviewees were approached, the interview generated some useful data that helped to explore the survey themes in depth and gain insights into the use of KINSHIP.

4 Results

Several themes were identified from the open-ended survey questions. This section explores the themes derived from the respondents ($n = 67$, a percentage of 4% of the survey target), see Table 1. Where appropriate, we also draw on the interview data concerning the KINSHIP user experiences and perceptions to complement the discussion. The respondents we were interested in had access to social media, with 82.8% using a handheld device such as tablet or mobile phone and 95.3% using a computer.

4.1 KINSHIP as an Academic Site to Support Professional Identity

Based on the survey data, most respondents (64.6%) considered that there was merit in the university offering KINSHIP as a space to practice and establish their digital and professional voices. The respondents' comments indicated that KINSHIP was beneficial to students for interactions with their peers for academic purposes. When students were asked to share their thoughts on the purpose of using KINSHIP, a high percentage associated its purpose with academic-related activities.

Table 1 Summary of the pilot results

KINSHIP as an academic site to support professional identity	KINSHIP was beneficial to students for interactions with their peers for academic purposes, as a space to practice and establish digital professional voices. It provided a suitable platform for activities such as clinical discussions as it is a private social network that is also institution-affiliated. KINSHIP may also help students by facilitating critical reflection and supporting global health learning for the students
Privacy	Respondents voiced concerns about the potential for their communications being scrutinised by staff, via KINSHIP. In addition, their accounts pointed to an important issue that relates to privacy and patient confidentiality, especially in clinical discussions, where confidential information of clinical cases needs to be protected
Awareness of KINSHIP and visibility	The KINSHIP platform was unknown to or seldom used by some of the students participating in this pilot. Promotion and advertisement were recommended to gain a critical mass of users for success
Facebook as a point of reference	Students favoured Facebook over KINSHIP in interface design, including popularity, ease of access, functionality and searchability, i.e. search facility to find people and topics
KINSHIP's interface design	The interface design could benefit from some improvement to address the lack of a system of notifications of activity via email/instant messaging for KINSHIP

The majority of survey respondents thought that the purpose of using KINSHIP is to connect or collaborate with friends from their modules/programme (54.8%), and find information about social activities in the university (35.5%). The interviewees indicated that KINSHIP provides a suitable platform for activities such as clinical discussions as it is a private social network and it is also institution-affiliated.

Many students indicated their preference for an institutional networking site like KINSHIP in relation to Facebook as they thought that the former is more professional and academically oriented while the latter is primarily used for social purposes. In addition, the perceived disadvantage of a commercial site such as Facebook in relation to KINSHIP was the public and permanent nature of what is written on Facebook groups—particularly for clinical students who should not discuss confidential, patient identifiable information on a commercial platform that can be data mined for income generation purposes.

When the respondents were asked about the merit in using KINSHIP to develop a sense of professional and academic community, 68.8% of them felt positive towards the use of KINSHIP as a platform for work/academic purposes. However, it should also be noted that a high percentage of respondents commented on the importance of KINSHIP uptake when they were asked about the advantages of establishing KINSHIP. The comments also echoed the interview data. For instance, the medical tutors commented that as the conversations in the KINSHIP forum were mainly associated with the clinical discussion on global health issues, the participating students acted professionally and the way in which they expressed themselves was also in line with the tone that one could find in the classroom discussions. The tutors' observation points to an important aspect that conducting this kind of academic collaboration in a network such as KINSHIP may help students develop and establish their professional digital voice. In addition, the tutors made the point that this type of online discussion also facilitates critical reflection and support global health learning for the students.

4.2 Privacy

When students were asked about their opinion on establishing a private social networking such as KINSHIP, most respondents (66.7%) were positive if it maintained privacy and professionalism standards. Respondents voiced concerns about the potential for their communications being scrutinised by staff, via KINSHIP, but few had considered the risk for their personal security to be compromised. In fact, the interview data highlighted the importance of privacy in clinical discussions in medicine. Their accounts pointed to an important issue that relates to privacy and patient confidentiality, especially in clinical discussions, where confidential information of clinical cases needs to be protected. It was indicated that Facebook might not be an ideal platform for such discussions as it is a commercial network, which could be non-secure.

Another key privacy issue that came up was concern about monitoring by the university, i.e. students fearing that their online activities would be scrutinised by staff. However, such an issue was not reflected in the interview data.

4.3 Awareness of KINSHIP and Visibility

The students' comments indicated an important issue that relates to visibility and awareness of social networking sites. According to the survey data, the KINSHIP platform was unknown to some of the students participating in this pilot. In addition, some of those that were registered stated that they seldom used it. In fact, these comments may also explain the low response rate in the survey, meaning that a large number of students registered to use KINSHIP, but a smaller number engaged in KINSHIP related activities. Promotion and advertisement were recommended to gain a critical mass of users for success.

4.4 Facebook as a Point of Reference

When the students were asked about the differences between KINSHIP and other established public social networks, such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and WhatsApp, they seemed to favour these over KINSHIP in interface design, including popularity, ease of access, functionality and searchability. This might be related to familiarity of the users with the Facebook interface as opposed to using the new interface and functionality of KINSHIP.

The students seemed to prefer Facebook as the online platform of choice for communication as it allows users to interact with people both within and outside the university whereas KINSHIP was only designed to be used by King's students and staff.

According to the student responses, Facebook had a fast search facility to find people and topics. While considering the type of networking that KINSHIP can offer, many students expressed the view that Facebook is universal ('open to everybody') and is used for social purposes, whereas KINSHIP was used mainly for academic purposes and was restricted to the university student body, an attribute of the KINSHIP design, which however could alienate some users that were used to the 'universality' and openness of Facebook.

4.5 KINSHIP's Interface Design

Many respondents expressed their dissatisfaction with the existing design/interface of KINSHIP. The student comments indicated that the interface design of KINSHIP could benefit from some improvement. Some students also thought that KINSHIP had a limited target audience and was only used for the university student body whereas other platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and WhatsApp have a much wider access to other users.

One key point raised by the respondents was the lack of a system of notifications of activity via email/instant messaging for KINSHIP, and there was a consensus that KINSHIP should offer this functionality (this type of functionality has become mainstream in commercial platforms). The other key theme from the student responses was the user uptake. Specifically, compared with other commercial social networking platforms, KINSHIP had a lower user uptake. In comparison, Facebook has much wider use and is virtually ubiquitous.

5 Discussion and Conclusions: Towards a Successful Adoption of a Social Networking Platform

Our findings indicate that most respondents were positive about using the social network (KINSHIP) to develop their profiles and professional voice. Empirical findings in this study project an advantage of KINSHIP compared to other social networks (such as commercial well known social networking sites), as it is exclusively accessible for people from King's and mainly being used for academic purposes. Targeting institutional users and using the platform for a mixture of the formal and the informal seem to be essential learning design characteristics. Users have responded favourably to the separation of purely social interactions and the work or academic informal or semi-formal interactions that KINSHIP can provide.

The empirical evidence of our evaluation points towards a set of design specifications that should be an integral part of the design of an institutional social networking site:

1. A well articulated identity for the platform to achieve wider adoption within the institution and active and consistent promotion to students and staff to ensure traffic;
2. Development and evolution of functionality in step with commercial platforms to achieve a 'smooth' experience for the users;
3. Improved accessibility and redeveloping the social network as a mobile application, to benefit from recent advances in mobile learning;
4. Embed privacy in the design to avoid concerns about potential monitoring by staff/institution;
5. Raising awareness about issues around IP ownership and the risks of allowing confidential data to be 'mined' by advertisers when using commercial platforms;
6. Simple authentication process and full integration mainly with the institutional virtual learning environment (VLE) and other institutional learning technologies;
7. Support to students by tutors and moderators to establish their digital voice.

In conclusion, continuous development of functionality, improved access via redeveloping the platform as a mobile application and addressing privacy concerns would be essential if an institutional social networking platform were to be a success.

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Appendix: Survey Questions

Age:

Gender:

School:

Degree:

1. Do you live:

(a) at home?

(b) in rented accommodation?

(c) in university accommodation? (e.g. halls of residence)

(we are asking because we want to ascertain you have access to broadband)

2. Do you access social media (e.g. Facebook or KINSHIP)

(a) on a handheld device (tablet or mobile phone)

(b) on a computer.

3. What do you think are the differences between Facebook and KINSHIP?

Textbox

4. What do you use KINSHIP for (tick all that apply)

- a) Connect or collaborate with friends from my module/programme
- b) Connect or collaborate with friends from other Schools and departments
- c) Find information about social activities in the College
- d) Find information about social activities outside the College
- e) Find information about my module/programme (timetable, deadlines, etc.)
- f) Find information about assessment activities
- g) Share files
- h) Share pictures
- i) See what other students are doing
- j) Advertise items to sell/buy or rent?

5. Do you think there is an advantage in having an enterprise social like KINSHIP?

YES/NO

Please explain

Textbox

6. Do you feel inhibited in using KINSHIP? (e.g you might feel that your activities can be scrutinised by staff/the institution and other students)

YES/NO

Please explain

7. Do you see any other disadvantages in using KINSHIP?

YES/No

If yes can you suggest any ways of overcoming them?

Textbox

8. Do you see an advantage for students in providing a UK hosted private social networking platform that does not track your movements across the whole Internet?

YES/NO

Any comments?

Textbox

9. Do you see an advantage in using such a social network as a hub to feed your other social networks?

YES/NO

Any comments?

Textbox

10. Do you feel there is merit in offering this platform as a space to practice and establish your professional digital voice?

YES/NO

Any comments

Textbox

11. Do you feel there is merit in the platform helping to establish a sense of community (between students)?

YES/NO

Textbox

12. Would it help your learning if the collaborative functionality of the platform was integrated with:

1. Moodle (KEATS)
2. Outlook
3. Virtual Campus (Medicine)

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